



The GED Language Arts, Reading Test

Fiction



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GED

Video Partner



Passing the GED Reading Test

A good novel tells us the truth about its hero; but a bad novel tells us the truth about its author.

G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936)

Video 13 Focus: how to read, analyze, and enjoy fiction stories

You will Learn From Video 13:

- How to identify the three main elements of fiction: characters, setting, and plot.
- How to tell who the narrator is and what is his/her point of view.
- To recognize a writer's theme and style.



Words You Need to Know:

As you watch the video, fill in the chart with the following words:

first person narrative, third person narrative, conflict, characters, or setting. Answers are on page 17.

1.	the people in the story
2.	where and when the story takes place
3.	tension or struggle, either external or internal
4.	when a story is told from the perspective of a character in the story; a powerful way to tell a story.
5.	when a story is told by someone not in the story

Points to Remember:

- Read a variety of fiction. Perhaps, start with short stories about a subject you are interested in.
- Practice identifying the characters, plot, and setting.
- Enjoy the pleasure of “dropping in” to an author’s world. Look for new authors you like to read.

Fiction consists of novels and short stories that deal with imaginary figures and events. The author invents a world with characters developed from the writer's mind. A novel is a long story with chapters and fully developed characters, settings, conflicts, and themes. It can be a classic novel, written long ago and widely read for a long time, or popular fiction, written by writers living today. The short story usually has a limited number of characters and is not as complex as far as conflict and theme. Like the novel, the short story can be classic or popular.

On the GED Reading Test, you will read and analyze three fiction passages. There will be approximately 18 questions to answer.

THE PURPOSE QUESTION: WHAT IT IS, WHERE IT IS FOUND, AND WHY YOU SHOULD ALWAYS READ IT

At the beginning of every reading is a question. The purpose of the question is to give a reason for reading the material. Use this question to focus your reading. You are not required to answer this question. It is given only to help you concentrate on the ideas presented in the excerpt. Here is a typical purpose question:

HOW DID DEATH VALLEY GET ITS NAME?

Now as you read the following paragraph, focus on the above question.



In Death Valley in the United States is the lowest and hottest spot in the country. This valley, located in California near the Nevada border, is 282 feet below sea level. It is not uncommon for temperatures to reach 125 degrees. A record of 134 degrees for the nation was recorded in 1931. Its grim name was given by a group of gold seekers in 1849.

The three main elements of fiction writing are:

- characters
- setting
- plot



Learning about characters: You will learn about the fictional characters of a story in a way similar to how you learn about real people in your life. Your impressions will be made by the character's actions, conversations, relationships, and environment. Let's look at what you can learn from a character's conversation. The author shows dialogue, or conversation between characters, in a certain way. Quotation marks (“ ”) are used to show the exact words a character says. When another person is speaking, the writer starts a new paragraph.

Look at the following excerpt from the novel, *The Star of Gettysburg*, by Joseph A. Altsheler. Four young men from the Army of Northern Virginia (The Confederate Army of the Civil War) are talking as one soldier is sewing a seam in his uniform. Read the purpose question to focus your reading, then answer the questions that follow about the characters as learned from their conversation.

WHAT TYPE OF PERSON IS ARTHUR?

“Will the seam show much, Arthur?”
luxuriously upon the leafy ground

“Very little when I finish,” replied St.
eye. “Of course, I can’t pass the
long time since I’ve seen a new one in
average.”



asked Harry Kenton, who lay
beside the log.

Clair, examining his work with a critical
uniform off as wholly new. It’s been a
our army, but it will be a lot above the

“I admire your care of your clothes, Arthur, even if I can’t quite imitate it. I’ve concluded that good clothes give a certain amount of moral courage, and if you get killed you make a much more decent body.”

“But Arthur St. Clair, of Charleston, sir, has no intention of getting killed,” said Happy Tom Langdon, who was also resting upon the earth. “He means after this war is over to go back to his native city, buy the most magnificent uniforms that were ever made, and tell the girls how Lee and Jackson turned to him for advice at the crisis of every great battle.”

“We surely needed wisdom and everything else we could get at Antietam—leadership, tenacity and the willingness to die,” said Dalton, the sober young Virginia Presbyterian. “Boys, we were in the deepest of holes there, and we had to lift ourselves out almost by our own boot straps.”

Harry’s face clouded. The field of Antietam often returned to him, almost as real and vivid as on that terrible day, when the dead lay heaped in masses around the Dunkard church and the Southern army called forth every ounce of courage and endurance for its very salvation.

“Antietam is a month away,” he said, “and I still shudder at the name. We didn’t think McClellan would come up and attack Lee while Jackson was away at Harper’s Ferry, but he did. How did it happen? How did he know that our army was divided?”

Joseph S. Altsheler, *The Star of Gettysburg*



Answers are on page 17.

1. Who is sewing a seam in his uniform?
 - A. Harry Kenton
 - B. Arthur St. Clair
 - C. Happy Tom Langdon
 - D. Dalton

2. You can infer from the conversation that Arthur is what type of soldier:
 - A. lazy
 - B. intelligent
 - C. pessimistic
 - D. bored

3. The Battle at Antietam is on the minds of the soldiers because
 - A. it was easily won.
 - B. it was only a month away and was fresh in their memories.
 - C. no one lost any men.
 - D. Lee and Jackson reviewed it with them.

4. Harry Kenton is lying on the leafy ground and is feeling
 - A. totally relaxed.
 - B. sleepy from the battle.
 - C. puzzled as to how the Union knew their troops were divided.
 - D. confused.

Learning about setting: The setting usually includes: the place, time, and the atmosphere in which the event occurs. Just as you read an invitation to a social event looking for the details of place and time, you will do the same as you read short stories and novels. The atmosphere is the general mood of the story, and how it makes you feel.

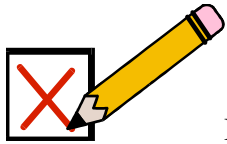
Jack London depicts the setting of a short story, “The Faith of Men,” a story about Alaskan gold miners, the following way: Again, read the purpose question before reading the paragraph.

WHAT IS THE SETTING OF THE STORY?

Though eight o’clock, it was still dark outside, and the cabin was lighted by a tallow candle thrust into an empty whisky bottle. It stood on the pine-board table in the middle of a disarray of dirty tin dishes. Tallow from innumerable candles had dripped down the long neck of the bottle and hardened into a miniature glacier. The small room, which composed the entire cabin, was as badly littered as the table; while at one end, against the wall, were two bunks, one above the other, with the blankets turned down just as the two men had crawled out in the morning.



Jack London, *The Faith of Men*



In the following blanks, find the basic elements of the setting.
Answers are on page 17.

Place: _____
Time: _____
Atmosphere of the place: _____

Interactive activity: Working with a classmate, both decide on a setting for a story, but do not tell each other what setting you have chosen. In a paragraph, describe the setting on the following lines. Do not tell directly where this scene is. See if your classmate can tell by the description you give what setting you envision. Use a lot of descriptive details. Make your paragraph as vivid as you can. If you are working alone, write a descriptive paragraph about a setting. Sample answer is on page 17.



My Setting

Learning about the plot: The plot tells what happens. It is the action that keeps the reader interested and eager to find out what happens next. You will often have conflicts, or clashes between opposing forces, within the plot. You only have to look at the headlines in newspapers to realize that conflict with the environment, society, other individuals, or within oneself is part of today's world.

The following headlines are examples of this conflict. Read each headline and on the line provided, describe the conflict; who or what (man/men, nature, society, oneself) versus who or what.



Answers are on page 17.

Union Oil Workers Picket Nonunion Members

1. _____ versus _____

Earthquake Hits West Coast Town of Paso Robles

2. _____ versus _____

Neighbors Go to Court Over Fence Boundary

3. _____ versus _____

Movie Actor Battles for Life with Cancer

4. _____ versus _____

Depressed Resident Succumbs to Suicide

5. _____ versus _____

The plot of a story, or the sequence of events, leads the reader to a believable conclusion. As you read, ask yourself, where is there a conflict? how is it resolved? and what will happen next?

The following excerpt from Sinclair Lewis's novel, *Babbitt*, displays conflict within a person in the character of George Babbitt. See if you can see where the conflict lies.



WHAT IS GEORGE'S CONFLICT?

He stopped smoking at least once a month. He went through with it like the solid citizen he was. He had seen the evils of tobacco, courageously made resolves, laid out plans to check the vice, tapered off his habit of cigars, and expounded the pleasures of virtuousness to everyone he met. He did everything, in fact, except stop smoking.

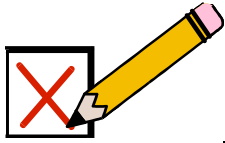
Two months before, by ruling out a schedule, noting down the hour and minute of each smoke, ecstatically increasing the intervals between smokes, he had brought himself down to three cigars a day. Then he had lost the schedule.

A week ago he had invented a system of leaving his cigar-case and cigarette-box in an unused drawer at the bottom of the correspondence file in the outer office. "I'll just naturally be ashamed to go to the file there all day long, making a fool of myself before my own employees!" he reasoned. By the end of the day, he was trained to leave his desk, walk to the file, take out and light a cigar, without knowing he was doing it.

This morning it was revealed to him that it had been too easy to open the file. Lock it, that was his idea. Inspired, he rushed out and locked up his cigars, his cigarettes, and even his box of safety matches with the key to the file drawer he hid in his desk. But the crusading passion of it made him so tobacco-hungry that he immediately recovered the key, walked with forbidding dignity to the file, took out a cigar and a match—"but only one match; if ole cigar goes out, it'll by golly have to stay out!" Later, when t

go out, he took one more match from the file, and when a buyer and a seller came in for a conference at eleven-thirty, naturally he had to offer them cigars. His conscience protested, "Why, you're smoking them!" but he bullied it, "Oh, shut up! I'm busy now. Of course by-and-by—" There was no by-and-by. His belief that he had crushed the unclean habit made him feel noble and very happy. When he came to Paul Riesling, he was, in his moral splendor, unusually eager.

Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt*



Answer is on page 17.

1. What is the conflict confronting George Babbitt?
 - A. He likes to smoke cigarettes, but not cigars.
 - B. He resolves to quit smoking, but he does not follow through with his plans.
 - C. He is foolish, but doesn't want his employees to know.
 - D. The problem of smoking is known to all his staff.

Learning about the narrator and point of view: The person who is telling the story is the narrator. Sometimes the author chooses to have the narrator be a character outside of the story. This method is known as third person narrative. In first person narrative, the author and the main character appear to be the same. The words *I* and *me* are used often in telling the story. The point of view, or how you, the reader, see the people, action, and situations is called the narrator's point of view.

Look at the reading from Anton Chekhov's short story, "The Schoolmistress." It is written in third person narrative. The point of view is from the perspective of an outsider. Read the purpose question and then answer the questions that follow.

WHO IS MARYA VASSILYEVNA?

At half-past eight they drove out of the town. The highroad was dry, a lovely April sun was shining warmly, but the snow was still lying in the ditches and in the woods. Winter, dark, long, and spiteful, was hardly over; spring had come all of

a sudden. But neither the warmth nor the languid transparent woods, warmed by the breath of spring, nor the black flocks of birds flying over the huge puddles that were like lakes, nor the marvelous fathomless sky, into which it seemed one would have gone away so joyfully, presented anything new or interesting to Marya Vassilyevna who was sitting in the cart.



For thirteen years she had been schoolmistress, and there was no reckoning how many times during all those years she had been to the town for her salary; and whether it were spring as now, or a rainy autumn evening, or winter, it was all the same to her, and she always --invariably -- longed for one thing only, to get to the end of her journey as quickly as could be.

She felt as though she had been living in that part of the country for ages and ages, for a hundred years, and it seemed to her that she knew every stone, every tree on the road from the town to her school. Her past was here, her present was here, and she could imagine no other future than the school, the road to the town and back again, and again the school and again the road.

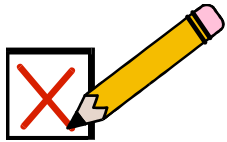
She had got out of the habit of thinking of her past before she became a schoolmistress, and had almost forgotten it. She had once had a father and mother; they had lived in Moscow in a big flat near the Red Gate, but of all that life there was left in her memory only something vague and fluid like a dream. Her father had died when she was ten years old, and her mother had died soon after. . . . She had a brother, an officer; at first they used to write to each other, then her brother had given up answering her letters, he had got out of the way of writing. Of her old belongings, all that was left was a photograph of her mother, but it had grown dim from the dampness of the school, and now nothing could be seen but the hair and the eyebrows.

When they had driven a couple of miles, old Semyon, who was driving, turned round and said:

"They have caught a government clerk in the town. They have taken him away.

The story is that with some Germans he killed Alexeyev, the Mayor, in Moscow."

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, *The Schoolmistress and Other Stories*



Answers are on page 18.

1. In the preceding passage, who tells you about Marya Vassilyevna?
 - A. Semyon
 - B. an unnamed narrator
 - C. the schoolmistress
 - D. her students

2. What words describe the schoolmistress?
 - A. depressed and needing a change
 - B. angry and anxious
 - C. jovial and excited
 - D. beautiful and young

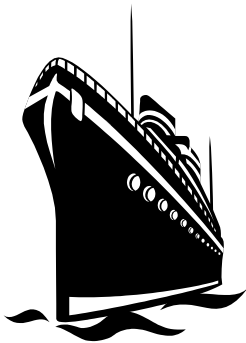
3. The setting of this story can best be described as:
 - A. in the country in winter
 - B. in the country in early spring
 - C. in the city in winter
 - D. in the city in early spring

4. What is the tone of this passage:
 - A. cheerful
 - B. sarcastic
 - C. angry
 - D. somber



In the novel, *Following the Equator*, Mark Twain writes in first person narrative. Notice the use of pronouns, such as *we*, *our*, and *us*. You learn of the situation through Mark Twain's eyes. Focus on the purpose question as you read the passage, and then answer the questions.

WHAT WAS MARK TWAIN'S OPINION OF THE SHIP?

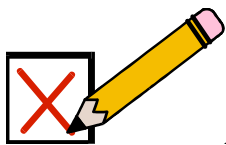


Ours was a reasonably comfortable ship, with the customary sea-going fare--plenty of good food furnished by the Deity and cooked by the devil. The discipline observable on board was perhaps as good as it is anywhere in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The ship was not very well arranged for tropical service; but that is nothing, for this is the rule for ships which ply in the tropics. She had an over-supply of cockroaches, but this is also the rule

with ships doing business in the summer seas—at least such as have been long in service. Our young captain was a very handsome man, tall and perfectly formed, the very figure to show up a smart uniform's best effects. He was a man of the best intentions and was polite and courteous even to courtliness. There was a soft and finish about his manners which made whatever place he happened to be in seem for the moment a drawing room. He avoided the smoking room. He had no vices. He did not smoke or chew tobacco or take snuff; he did not swear, or use slang or rude, or coarse, or indelicate language, or make puns, or tell anecdotes, or laugh intemperately, or raise his voice above the moderate pitch enjoined by the canons of good form. When he gave an order, his manner modified it into a request. After dinner he and his officers joined the ladies and gentlemen in the ladies' saloon and shared in the singing and piano playing, and helped turn the music. He had a sweet and sympathetic tenor voice, and used it with taste and effect the music he played whist there, always with the same partner and opponents, until the ladies' bedtime. The electric lights burned there as late as the ladies and their friends might desire; but they were not allowed to burn in the smoking-room after eleven. There were many laws on the ship's statute book of course; but so far as I could see, this and one other were the only ones that were rigidly enforced. The captain explained that he enforced this one because his own cabin adjoined the smoking-room, and the smell of tobacco smoke made him sick. I did not see how our smoke could reach him, for the smoking-room and his cabin were on the upper deck, targets for all the winds that blew; and besides there was no crack of communication between them, no opening of any sort in the solid intervening bulkhead. Still, to a delicate stomach even imaginary smoke can convey damage.



Mark Twain, *Follow the Equator*



Answers are on page 18.

1. What did Mark Twain think of the food served on the ship?
 - A. He thought the food was heavenly.
 - B. It was hot as the devil.
 - C. The food was plentiful, but poorly prepared.
 - D. It could have been tastier.

2. Because this was a summer trip in the tropics, what “passengers” were aboard but not invited?

- A. stowaway passengers
- B. natives of the islands
- C. cockroaches
- D. children and their families



3. What did Mark Twain think of the captain?

- A. He thought he was not as tough as he should be.
- B. He was very sensitive to tobacco smoke.
- C. He was mature and handsome.
- D. He was forceful in the manner he gave commands.

4. What tone characterizes Mark Twain’s writing?

- A. politeness
- B. anger
- C. compassion
- D. humor



Learning about theme: From the setting, plot, characters, and language, the reader is able to identify the theme of a short story or novel. It is rarely stated in words, but it is the underlying work of fiction and gives it meaning. You must take all the information and make an inference to decide what is the theme. In fables the theme or message is often included as the “lesson in life” and is stated in the last line of the fable.

In the following Aesop fable, “The Wolf and the Lamb,” the theme has been omitted. Read and decide what is the lesson to be learned.

WHAT IS THE THEME?

ONCE upon a time a Wolf was lapping at a spring on a hillside when, looking up, should he see but a Lamb just beginning to drink a little lower down. “There’s my thought he, “if only I can find some excuse to seize it.” Then he called out to the I “How dare you muddle the water from which I am drinking?”

“Nay, master, nay,” said Lambikin; “if the water be muddy up there, I cannot be tl of it, for it runs down from you to me.”

“Well, then,” said the Wolf, “why did you call me bad names this time last year?”

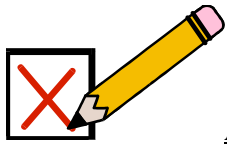
“That cannot be,” said the Lamb; “I



am only six months old.”

“I don’t care,” snarled the Wolf; “if it was not you it was your father,” and with th
rushed upon the poor little Lamb and ate her all up.

Aesop, *Aesop’s Tale*



Answer is on page 18.

1. Before she died, what did the lamb say?
 - A. “Beware lest you lose the substance by grasping at the shadow.”
 - B. “Any excuse will serve a tyrant”
 - C. “Lambs and wolves don’t play well together.”
 - D. “I am too young to die.”

Learning about style: Every writer has his/her distinguishing characteristics or style. The author’s unique use of language results in the style of the author. Style can be analyzed by the writer’s diction or word choice. The style can be formal, informal, or conversational.

Here are three descriptions explaining how to start a car. One is written by an engineer, another a father teaching his child to drive, and the third, a teenager talking to his best friend. Each uses words appropriate for his/her intended readers.



Formal: Insert the key, holding it in the proper position, into the ignition. Turn said key forward to engage the engine. Position the gear shift to *drive*. Accelerate by depressing the gas pedal slowly until the appropriate rate of speed is reached. Maintain proper rate of speed in accordance with driving conditions.

Informal: Turn on the motor. Put the gear shift in *drive*. Step on the gas slowly. Drive with the flow of the traffic.

Conversational: Gas it up. Let it rip. Cruise on out.

EXERCISE

Using what you have learned about analyzing fiction writing, answer the following questions. The reading is a passage from a book about an orphan who is given the opportunity to go to college at the expense of a benefactor she does not know. This is a letter she writes to him.

WHAT TONE DOES THIS LETTER HAVE?

The Letters of
Miss Jerusha Abbott to

Mr. Daddy-Long-Legs Smith
215 FERGUSSEN HALL



24th September



Dear Kind-Trustee-Who-Sends-
Orphans-to-College,

Here I am! I travelled yesterday for four hours in a train. It's a funny sensation, isn't it? I never rode in one before.

College is the biggest, most bewildering place--I get lost whenever I leave my room. I will write you a description later when I'm feeling less muddled; also I will tell you about my lessons.

Classes don't begin until Monday morning, and this is Saturday night. But I wanted to write a letter first just to get acquainted. It seems queer to be writing letters to somebody you don't know. It seems queer for me to be writing letters at all--I've never written more than three or four in my life, so please overlook it if these are not a model kind.

Before leaving yesterday morning, Mrs. Lippett and I had a very serious talk. She told me how to behave all the rest of my life, and especially how to behave towards the kind gentleman who is doing so much for me. I must take care to be Very Respectful.

But how can one be very respectful to a person who wishes to be called John Smith? Why couldn't you have picked out a name with a little personality? I might as well write letters to Dear Hitching-Post or Dear Clothes-Prop.

I have been thinking about you a great deal this summer; having somebody take an interest in me after all these years makes me feel as though I had found a sort of family. It seems as though I belonged to somebody now, and it's a very comfortable sensation. I must say, however, that when I think about you, my imagination has very little to work upon. There are just three things that I know:

- I. You are tall.
- II. You are rich.
- III. You hate girls.

I suppose I might call you Dear Mr. Girl-Hater. Only that's rather insulting to me. Or Dear Mr. Rich-Man, but that's insulting to you, as though money were the only important thing about you. Besides, being rich is such a very external quality. Maybe you won't stay rich all your life; lots of very clever men get smashed up in Wall Street. But at least you will stay tall all your life! So I've decided to call you Dear Daddy-Long-Legs. I hope you won't mind.



It's just a private pet name we won't tell Mrs. Lippett.

The ten o'clock bell is going to ring in two minutes. Our day is divided into sections by bells. We eat and sleep and study by bells. It's very enlivening; I feel like a fire horse all of the time. There it goes! Lights out. Good night.

Observe with what precision I obey rules--due to my training in the John Grier Home.

Yours most respectfully,
Jerusha Abbott

Jean Webster, *Daddy-Long-Legs*



Answers are on page 18.

2. The reader of the letter views college and the newness of it through the eyes of
 - (1) the trustee.
 - (2) Mr. Smith.
 - (3) Mr. Daddy-Long-Legs.
 - (4) Jerusha Abbott.
 - (5) an experienced student.

3. The mood or tone displayed in the letter is
 - (1) uncertain.
 - (2) insulting.
 - (3) depressed.
 - (4) confused.
 - (5) joyous and thankful

4. If John Smith were to make contributions to his local Red Cross unit, he would want to
 - (1) remain anonymous.
 - (2) announce it on the local news.
 - (3) have his picture in the paper.
 - (4) be called Daddy-Long-Legs.
 - (5) receive a receipt for tax benefits.

1. The letter to Mr. Daddy-Long-Legs Smith is written
 - (1) in first person narrative.
 - (2) in third person narrative.
 - (3) with an outside narrator.
 - (4) in a unique style.
 - (5) with no style.

Answers, Examples, and Explanations

Page 2: Words You Need to Know

1. characters
2. setting
3. conflict
4. first person narrative
5. third person narrative

Page 4: Characters

1. **B Comprehension (supporting details)**
2. **B Analysis** In paragraph 4, the other soldiers talk about how Lee and Jackson turned to Arthur for advice.
3. **B Comprehension (supporting details)** In paragraph 7, the soldiers talk about the battle being a month ago.
4. **C Analysis** In the last paragraph, Harry explains why the battle did not go as planned, and he sounds perplexed as to the reason.

Page 6: Setting

- inside a cabin in Alaska
- 8 a.m.
- littered with dishes, two bunks unmade; very small, only one room

Page 6: Interactive Activity (Sample description of a setting)

The sand is warm and as white as snow. I love the warmth of the earth, especially after having come from below zero weather. The palm trees blow gently in the breeze, and the tropical flowers have a heavenly scent. The water is the clearest I have ever seen, with colorful fish darting at my feet. This is a true wonderland. (The setting is a tropical beach.)

Page 7: Plot

1. men vs. men
2. nature vs. society
3. men vs. men
4. man vs. nature
5. man vs. self

Page 8: Plot, Conflict

1. **B Analysis (inference, conclusion)** He “laid out plans to quit,” “tapered off his allowance of cigars,” and “he did everything, in fact, except stop smoking.”

Page 10-11: Narrator and Point of View

1. **B Synthesis** The story teller is outside the story.
2. **A Analysis (conclusion)** Such phrases as “for thirteen years, she had been the schoolmistress” and “she could imagine no other future than the school” lead to the negative conclusion.
3. **B Analysis (conclusion)** The details, such as “lovely April sun,” “in the woods” lead to the conclusion.
4. **D Synthesis (tone)** All details lead to a grim mood.

Page 12-13: Narrator and Point of View

1. **C Analysis (figurative language)** “Plenty of good food furnished by the Deity and cooked by the devil” can only be interpreted by **C**.
2. **C Comprehension (supporting details)** “She had an oversupply of cockroaches” which seemed to be the norm for ships in the tropics in the summer.
3. **A Comprehension (supporting details)** All the other answers are not true. In line 16 “there was a soft and finish about his manners which made whatever place he happened to be in seem for the moment a drawing room.”
4. **D Synthesis (tone)** Such remarks as “to a delicate stomach even imaginary smoke can convey damage,” indicate Mark Twain wrote with humor.

Page 14: Theme

1. **B Synthesis (theme)** The excuses to eat the lamb, such as the lamb was dirtying the water and calling the wolf bad names a year ago (when the lamb was only six months old) are evidence of the theme.

Page 16: EXERCISE

1. **(1) Analysis (point of view)** Notice the use of the word *I* throughout the reading.
2. **(4) Analysis (point of view)** Again, Jerusha is telling her own story in a letter format.
3. **(5) Analysis (mood)** Use of words such as *comfortable sensation*, *private pet name*, and *yours most respectfully* depict the mood of the letter.
4. **(1) Application** Since John Smith did not use his real name in this situation, it would follow that he would want to remain anonymous.